

The Von Neumann Machine

I slowly float down an empty white hallway. Looking around, I can see door ways surrounded by tiny multicolored buttons flashing on and off. A month ago I was dazzled by them but now they only remind me that I'm up here in a claustrophobic space station instead of on the ground where I belong.

I float into the storage room and snatch a ration off of a rapidly decreasing pile of food. Glancing around the dimly lit room I can see a few of my fellow engineers half-heartedly eating their own breakfast. I drift towards the single small window. A week ago we would have all been gathered around it longing for a home a million miles away but now I'm the only one who has the courage to look at the world that we doomed.

For years my team and I have worked on a prototype Von Neumann machine, a miniature self-replicating spacecraft capable of mining a world for its resource. It was the next big leap in space travel. It was more important than Sputnik and Apollo 11 combined. We were sent up into outer space to send the machine out into the sky. It would have been the start of colonizing the stars. But it's impossible to start a colony without colonists.

Something went wrong with the programming and instead of zooming off to find a planet in the next nearest solar system, it found the nearest planet in ours, Earth. Within 11 hours from now it will reach Earth's atmosphere. Within a day from now it will start drilling into Earth's crust. Within 4 weeks it will not only have broken through the crust but the machine will have made over 10,000 replicas. After only six months the core will be completely eaten away. The Earth will be nothing but a hollow husk, void of life.

We tried to contact people back home but the system's AI was programmed with survival instincts. It saw our communication as a threat to its artificial life so it eliminated it. Everyone down on the ground probably assumes we're dead, lost in space for all eternity. I bet our funerals have already been held.

It's funny how peaceful the world looks from up here, when in reality it's a world on fire. It's a place full of grief and tragedy. A place where misery runs rampant and cowardice is king. A place where arrogance and pride hurt those whom we love most, arrogance like ours.

We were foolish enough to think we could build God. We thought we were creating the solutions to everyone's problems. We rushed through everything always looking for the next greatest discovery with no regard for our actions. We thought we were geniuses but in truth we were imbeciles. We didn't create solutions, we created problems. We didn't build God, we created the Devil. Now the underworld is unleashed and I have no one to blame but myself.

**By Trevor Smith, 8th Grade
Blacksburg Middle School
First Place**

In Twenty Years

In twenty years,
My children will look into my eyes
Through a sea of technology.
Trapped in a world
Where Mother Nature is a fantasy.
No longer will children ask their parents,
"Why is the sky blue?"
But instead they will turn to artificial intelligence
Asking, "Why is the sky gray?"
People will walk around in their own little world
Treating real friendship as though it were yesterday.
For, no longer will we understand
The true meaning of friendship;
Only caring about the number of acquaintances
We call "friends" on the underlip
Of a ship starting to sink into an ocean
Called "social media."
We'll be stuck in the notion
That the only way to advance
Is to broaden our field of technology
So that we can change our circumstance.
We will teach our children
That the important thing in life is themselves.
Not our loving Mother Nature
Who feeds us everyday
And can be seen through every creature.
Our children will no longer experience her beauty,
Because we will be trapped in a mentality
Centered around greed and immorality,
But this doesn't need to become a reality,
If we understand that we are not
The center of the universe.
If we open our eyes to the pain and sorrow,
We can stop focusing on the here and now
And maybe think about what we can do tomorrow.
For we were all born with imaginations.
Capable of filling innumerable oceans
With ideas and thoughts
Not for selfish reason that have lead to wars fought,
But to help a new generation of trees
Touch a smog free sky,
Where rivers no longer run dry.
To help our children learn to help and befriend
Anyone, no matter their dialect or race
And not through social media, but face to face.
Then hopefully, in twenty years,
We will be able to stand in a world
That we are proud to call our home.

**By Karen Villanueva, 7th Grade
Blacksburg Middle School
Second Place**

In 20 Years

In 20 years
Will my children be shells of me
Will sun shine though them
Like rays of sunlight
Through cracks in a door
Will my children be strong
If I cannot
Will they reach into the dark
And the unknown
Will they run blindfolded
Through the game of life
As a wall
For everyone who needs them
Will they reach for the impossible
To discover that life has no limits
Will they make the days last
Making the best of what they have
Will they turn a feather to a pen
And a pen to a story
A story of their life
Of their world
Will they write
Painting words on paper
Will they be wise with age
And love pure as ice
Being a face of remembrance
For all who has the gift of meeting them
But if they don't
And the rocks of life broke them
I will still love
With all my heart
For I believe a parent's unconditional love
Is the one thing
That every child
Mean or nice
Young or old
Should never lose.

What does the future hold
In its rough hands
Hands of age
Of wisdom
In a world of mystery
And confusion
Will I be lost
IN a sea of what ifs
And found on an island of maybes
Or will I have a helping hand
Something to guide me through
Like a compass
Like a child shows a mother
All she can do
Like a dog
Shows its owner how to care
Life's funny like that
You help something that ends up helping you
It's a circle
It's a pattern
A pattern called life
And we're all just another line
Put there to make something
That alone looks odd
But in a whole looks amazing

Does anybody know
All they can do
What they can be
Who they are
Is anybody sure
What the future holds
What the past means
And how the present came to be
Does anybody know
Will anybody ever
That's the puzzle of life
The twist at the end of the maze
The turn that makes you wonder what it was all for
That will leave you questioning
everything

In 20 years
I'll be wise with age
Strong with loss
And love with tears
In 20 years
Will the world be recognizable
Will the past make sense
Will the present be remembered
In 20 years
What memories will I keep
In a secret place
Within my heart
In 20 years
Will I see the world
In black and white
Will I see my dreams
My hopes
My fears
In 20 years
Will life be as colorful
As happy
As magical
As life today

you can have as much money as you wish and still be poor
To this he said I was mad
He said I made no sense
I said I have no wish
One hope
For the future
That in 20 years
I will still believe
You can have as much money as you wish and still be poor

In 20 years
Will I regret my decisions
Will I make sense of my past
Will I look beyond the possible
To the unknown
And run straight forward
With no what ifs
Or maybe
For those are limitations
Limitations that stop you
From being all the you are
In 20 years
Will the world be forgiving
And guide me through
A maze they call life
With many twists
And turns
And dead ends
But many wonderful
Beautiful
Amazing surprises
Which makes it all worth it
Don't you think
All the bad nights and long days
All the regret and pain
All the years of self forgiveness
It will all be worth it

**By Skyler Mawby, 7th Grade
Blacksburg Middle School
Third Place**

The Year 2037

Ok.
You want to know what it's really going to be like?
In 20 years,
Nothing's going to change.
Maybe there'll be some new technology, but
Human nature will never change,
There's still going to be
Bigotry,
Famine,
Corruption,
And all-around bad stuff.
Just as we looked back on the 80s with nostalgia,
And the 60s,
And the 20s,
And so on,
In the year 2037,
We'll look back at now,
And bask in how simple we had it back then.
There's still going to be the old farts
Who complain about all of this high-tech new stuff,
There's still going to be the young generation,
Who makes fun of how grumpy the old farts are,
And history will repeat itself,
Right
Under
Our
Noses.
There will be new advancements, sure,
VR,
JetPacks,
Self-Driving cars,
But,
As human nature goes,
It will all turn to war.
It always turns to war.
Could there be a way to stop this?
Before the human race implodes from within?
Probably not,
But there is always hope.

**By Ulysses Gabriele, 7th Grade
Blacksburg Middle School
Honorable Mention**

A COLORFUL JEWEL

RED AND YELLOW,
BLACK AND WHITE,
WORDS WE USE,
BY DAY AND NIGHT.

SO ACCUSTOMED
TO USING OUR SIGHT,
DO WE EVEN KNOW,
WERE FIGHTING THE WRONG FIGHT?

20 YEARS FROM NOW,
SO FAR AWAY,
BUT WILL WE STILL BE PAYING,
THE PRICE WE PAY TODAY?

FROM SO MANY VIEWS,
THAT SHOW NO GRACE,
WILL COME ONE FEELING,
OF A SINGLE HUMAN RACE.

FROM WAR AND HATE,
WILL ARISE NO FATE.

FROM SORROWS AND DESPAIR
WILL COME THOSE WHO WILL ALWAYS CARE.

AND FROM PUSH AND PULL,
WILL COME A COLORFUL JEWEL.

SO 20 YEARS FROM NOW,
IS FAR AWAY,
BUT I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL BE ABLE TO FEEL AND SEE,
ONE WORLD OF UNITY.

**BY KOLBY BROWN, 8TH GRADE
CHRISTIANSBURG MIDDLE SCHOOL
HONORABLE MENTION**